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Ruins of the 'Lost City' built on a hill-top at Umm-al-'Amad, in the Rub-al-Khali desert, showing deserted 'modern' houses built by later inhabitants

following p 140 (f)

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CHAPTER XVII

IN December, 1944, an R.A.F. pilot, flying a Lodestar aircraft between Salala, in Dhufar, and Muscat, went a long way off his course and made a forced landing at Sharjah. It was rumoured that he had crossed the eastern section of the Rub-al-Khali desert and had noticed several interesting things on the ground, including the wreckage of several aircraft, one of them ostensibly Italian. For many years I had been interested in the Great South Desert, as Major Cheeseman called it in his book *In Unknown Arabia*, and had read of its loneliness and vast extent in St. John Philby's *The Empty Quarter*, and Mr. Bertram Thomas's *Alarms and Excursions*. These fine books, together with Burton's translation of the *Arabian Nights*, Doughty's *Arabia Deserta*, and Lawrence's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, transported me in fancy from the easy chair of my London flat to the burning sands of the desert, but never in my wildest dreams did I imagine that I should ever stand on the threshold of the unexplored Rub-al-Khali.

In parenthesis, I think few people realize that it was one of Colonel Lawrence's ambitions to visit the Rub-al-Khali. Even when he was living in semi-retirement in his Dorset cottage among the rhododendrons at Wool, working out new designs for the fastest power boats ever to be conceived by engineers (improved prototypes of which were used by naval and Commando raiding parties in 1944), 'E. T. Shaw', as he called himself, expressed a desire to renew his acquaintance with the Arabs and study the archæological remains of the *Empty Quarter*. I first met Lawrence through a journalist friend in a Chancery Lane flat, and visited him several times at Cloud's Hill Cottage. The conversation was invariably about Arabia, and Lawrence was intensely interested in the legend of a 'lost city' which was said to exist in the middle of the Rub-al-Khali.

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1 [Lawrence -- Analyst

2: O'Shea G-3 (1944-1945) 1947 MK4 Trucial Oman MK4

region of Wabar. There is always some substance in these Arab tales.'

The story of King 'Ad resembles the legends of King Arthur and has been handed down by Arabian poets and singers through the centuries, and was told by Shahrazad to King Sha..riyar in the *Thousand and One Nights*. Just as some historians believe that Arthur was no mere hero-king of myth, but an early British chief, so is it probable that 'Ad Ibn Kin'ad, a sheikh of considerable power in the dim past, ruled part of the Rub-al-Khali and built a city there.

This story has many detractors, amongst them Mr. St. John Philby, a noted Arabian traveller and Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society, who claims in his book, *The Empty Quarter*, to have discovered the 'lost city' near Ibrahima, at a place called Al Hadida, which he identifies with Wabar. Yet all he found were the large craters formed by a meteor which fell here in prehistoric times, the shape and appearance of which, he supposes, gave rise to the legend of a buried city. Valuable as Mr. Philby's discovery undoubtedly was to the scientific world, his theory that these craters are the 'lost city' of the Rub-al-Khali is flimsy in the extreme and cannot be accepted by serious archæologists. In fact, in another part of his book he expresses the belief that the city of King 'Ad probably existed in Yeman or the Hadramaut.

The incident is referred to in Mr. Philby's introduction, in which he confesses his bitter disappointment at being beaten in the 'race for the Rub-al-Khali' by his old rival, Mr. Bertram Thomas, who crossed the desert a year before him in 1931.

There is no doubt that he believed that he alone had found the 'lost city', and was satisfied in his own mind that others which existed in the desert were not identifiable with that of King 'Ad's.

That such a city existed I have no doubt, and a great many intelligent Arabs are convinced of it. Whether it was the residence of King 'Ad is a matter for conjecture, but there are legends connecting Wabar with the modern Hilla, the site of ancient Babylon, and a great caravan route which transported frankincense, gold, pearls and spices to Iraq is said to have crossed the desert in this direction.

A great deal of nonsense has been said and written about the Rub-al-Khali. The crossings of Mr. Philby and Mr. Thomas were notable achievements in the history of exploration, but several

2: O'Shea G-3 (1944-1945) 1947 MK4 Trucial Oman MK4

172 at his dirty grey beard before answering. 'Praise Allah, but it must be a thousand years,' he answered. 'In all my days I have never seen such a city as this; it is not built as we Arabs build, but is more like your foreign buildings.'

Being neither archæologists nor historians, we could not conjecture the age or the probable origins of this strange town on the hilltop. None of our Arabs had heard of it before, and it is not near any of the caravan routes or Bedouin encampments. Small lakes of water lay at the flat end of the bowl, suggesting that there is no lack of moisture during the rainy season; this would explain the abundance of vegetation we found growing there. One curious feature of the ruins were the large circular stone discs, the size of a cartwheel, with a hole in the centre with rays, roughly hewn with some blunt instrument, extending like spokes to the rim. These discs were composed of a hard white limestone and were about four inches in thickness across the rim. Hamid also found a piece of broken black pottery, with a high glaze, which I took back with me and presented to the Sheikh of Al 'Ajman.

Was this, I wondered, the 'lost city' of the Rub-al-Khali, whose whereabouts has for centuries been a theme of fascinating speculation amongst explorers and travellers? If it were not the fabled seat of the legendary King 'Ad, then perhaps it was the seat of a lost tribe which had wandered across the desert and made its home far from the haunts of men on the top of an isolated hill. The truth we may never know, but any archæologist who wishes to follow in our footsteps and find this city for himself will doubtless be able to estimate its approximate age and reconstruct the plan of its buildings; excavation may even yield the secret of its origin and bring to light evidences of the tribe which built it in the dim past.

That night we encamped at the foot of the hill, the Arabs climbing to the top to obtain water and grass for the camels. Suliman refused to go up, however, insisting that the ruins were haunted by a malevolent djinn. To banish his fears we lit a huge fire of brushwood, for the night was cold, and smoked our pipes in content. I for one felt that our journey had been worth while and that we had accomplished something which no other foreign travellers had succeeded in doing.

487 In the morning, when the haze had lifted, we had a closer view of the desert from the summit, and Schultz, looking through his field-glasses, observed a clump of trees which he thought might be

2: O'Shea G-3 (1944-1945) 1947 MK4 Trucial Oman MK4

It was as well that we did so, for we were told later by a party of Bedouins whom we encountered on the return journey, that these sands get worse and worse towards the western desert and have swallowed up whole caravans of camels. We were fortunate from another point of view. When about ten miles from Qara, Abdulla, the ex-slave, who was walking beside the leading camel, suddenly gave a great shout. He pointed towards the shimmering horizon and, shading our eyes, we could just see the flat summit of a large hill which seemed to rise steeply out of the desert. It was one of those curious rock formations one sometimes sees in the Rub-al-Khali, and we decided to ride towards it. From the summit we might obtain a good view of our surroundings, for we had lost our bearings, and were not quite sure whether Qara lay behind or ahead of us.

At four o'clock in the afternoon, after a hard gallop across the sands, we reached the slopes of the hill, which was about five hundred feet above sand-level. The summit, which I estimated was a thousand yards long, was as flat as a billiard table, and the crumbling sandstone cliffs were precipitous and slippery. The camels were left grazing on some *harm* bushes at the foot of the hill, while Schultz, Hamid and I climbed the rock, reaching the summit after a stiff climb. It was not quite as flat on top as we had imagined. The sides were smooth and covered with a layer of sand, but in the centre there was a large bowl-shaped depression with gently-sloping sides. The slopes were profuse with vegetation, including stunted *gharf* and *samr* bushes, and a short, dry grass with razor-like edges. What took our breath away, however, was the sight of a derelict town at the base of this bowl.

The buildings covered about two acres, and were surrounded by a low wall of crumbled sandstone blocks, which at one time had been much higher. Most of the buildings were a mass of rubble, so that it was difficult to distinguish houses or streets, but two of the towers were still standing; these measured thirty feet in circumference and were forty feet high. The tops were not crenellated like the fort towers of Oman, but smooth and unembellished, with small lookouts through which one had a good view of the surrounding desert. The walls themselves were in places four feet thick, the stone blocks—the largest of which measured two feet in length and eighteen inches in width—being held together by a rough mortar made of gypsum and clay.

We asked Hadi how old he thought the city was, and he pulled